The Christian Ethic - Responsible Freedom, Part I
Matthew 22:34-40; Galatians 5:13-15
September 29, 1968
Rev. John H. Buchanan

"As the Russian armies drove westward to meet the Americans and the British at the Elbe, a Soviet patrol picked up a Mrs. Bergmeier foraging for food for her three children. Unable even to get word to the children, and without any clear reason for it, she was taken off to a prison camp in the Ukraine. Her husband had been captured in the Bulge and taken to a P.O.W. camp in Wales.

"When he returned to Berlin, he spent weeks and weeks rounding up his children; two were found in a detention home run by the Russians, and the oldest, Hans, fifteen, was found hiding in a cellar near the Alexander Platz. Their mother's whereabouts remained a mystery, but they never stopped searching. She more than anything else was needed to reknit them as a family in that dire situation of hunger, chaos and fear.

"Meanwhile, in the Ukraine, Mrs. Bergmeier learned through a sympathetic commandant that her husband and family were trying to keep together and find her. But the rules allowed them to release her for only two reasons: (1) illness needing medical facilities beyond the camp's, in which case she would be sent to a Soviet hospital elsewhere, and (2) pregnancy, in which case she would be returned to Germany as a liability.

"She turned things over in her mind and finally she asked a friendly Volga German camp guard to impregnate her, which he did. Her condition being medically verified, she was sent back to Berlin and to her family. They welcomed her with open arms, even when she told them how she had managed it. When the child was born, they loved him more than all the rest, on the view that little Dietrich had done more for them than anybody.

"When it was time for him to be christened, they took him to the pastor on a Sunday afternoon. After the ceremony they sent Dietrich home with the children and sat down in the pastor's study to ask him whether they were right to feel as they did about Mrs. Bergmeier and Dietrich. Should they be grateful to the Volga German? Had Mrs. Bergmeier done a good and right thing?" (Joseph Fletcher, Situation Ethics, Westminster, 1966, p. 164 ff)

That rather colorful ethical dilemma is cited in a very controversial book by Professor Joseph Fletcher entitled Situation Ethics, The New Morality. It summarizes the direction Christian Ethics has been taking for the past decade or so. It is a controversial book because it probes far deeper than we are accustomed to going when we attempt to articulate a given "morality" or code of ethics. How do you judge Mrs. Bergmeier? If, in her dilemma, you can find a handle, something to call absolutely good, or absolutely bad, you have, in fact, an ethic - a system by which you know how to make moral decisions. If her predicament bothers you: if you are torn between what you think you ought to believe and what you want to believe, you are one of the many sensitive Christians participating in the great ethical debate of our generation. The debate may be summarized as follows:"Is there a list of acts that are always, under all circumstances, bad? Or is 'morality' an approach to different situations that requires an individual decision every time?"

Christian Ethics has always been a troublesome topic; in fact, the one area about which more has been written with less agreement than any other. The problem began when Jesus found himself in disagreement with the going morality of his own day. That morality was encased in the Holy Judaic Law, a very complex legal system which had a rule for every possible human situation. It is helpful to remember that the Jews did not differentiate between "civil crime" and "religious sin". There was one law.

On occasion Jesus broke one of those rules - to the dismay and chagrin of the Pharisees. Finally, they pinned him down: "Master, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" He answered - "Love God with all your heart, soul and mind." And "Love your neighbor as yourself." But he didn't stop there. Instead he made matters infinitely more complex by adding, "Everything in the law and prophets hangs on these two commandments." Jesus was not opposed to the Law, but he was saying that morality-

the Christian Ethic if you will - is something deeper, more personal and individualistic than can ever be reduced to a code or legal system.

Several years later, the Apostle Paul fought the battle all over again, and in the process wrote down some guidelines that have to be considered in any investigation of Christian Ethics today. Everywhere he went with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Paul encountered strong resistance from Jewish Christians. Their position was that a Christian must first accept and obey the Jewish law. This is the issue behind his letter to the Galatians. To them he proposed a new freedom from the law - the Christian life is lived by grace and faith. The law won't save you; Jesus Christ has already done that; live your lives as men who are already saved. Of course, a reaction set in. If men are already saved by Christ; if there is nothing the law can do to help them - why bother with law at all? Why not just do whatever you please and chalk it up to Christian Freedom? That is precisely what happened within the fledgling Christian communities at Corinth and Galatia. Under the guize of Christian freedom, men and women were living without any moral restraints and their behavior - as Paul described it in his letters - must have been something else again.

It is out of this context, then, that we hear Paul say, "You, my friends, were called to be free men; only do not turn your freedom into license for your lower nature, but be servants to one another in love. For the whole law can be summed up in a single commandment: "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Gal. 5:13-14)

The Christian movement was not yet twenty years old and questions were being raised with which we are still struggling today. How does a Christian make ethical decisions? What is good? What is evil? What is the ultimate, foundational norm for devising a code of ethics? Or is there any such thing? You see, these are the very same questions which Mrs. Bergmeier's predicament raises for us - questions which you and I are a little reluctant to answer.

The New Testament is wrongly used when men attempt to squeeze a code of behavior out of it. It's just not there. But there are guidelines and there is a theology, a specific starting point, and it is this: men are called to be free, free from petty restrictions to their behavior. But this freedom operates under the umbrella of love and responsibility for other men. That is where any Christian ethic has to begin. Paul, for instance, felt himself to be, for the first time in his life, gloriously free from the restrictiveness of the Jewish law. And at the same time he was preaching freedom he was admonishing his people to be slaves to each other.

There are today three basic ethical positions, all three reflected somewhere by someone claiming to be a Christian. The first and most obvious is the position of legalism. Adherents of this position hold that there are certain things which are bad, that they always have been bad and always will be bad. To shift our semantics, Sin is a rather specific list of acts which a Christian must never commit. The content of the Christian ethic for these people is eternal, it never changes. Good is good; evil is evil, and that's that. As a by-product, people who hold this position morally are usually inclined to grant the civil law the same aura of sanctity. The law is to be obeyed regardless of the situation or the dictates of Conscience. Generally, this position has been characteristic of institutional Christianity - both Roman Catholic and Protestant.

The second position is called anti-nomianism - anti-legalism, no laws, or moral anarchy. Only the very courageous or the very foolish attempt to articulate this position publically, although sociologists are now warning us that it is, in fact, the position of people today who make decisions on the basis of nothing other than the expediency of the moment.

The third position is that of the Situationist. For him, his decision, his behavior, is going to depend on several things, first among them the particularities of the immediate situation. To this position the Christian brings certain guidelines, defining what is generally good and what is not. At this point, allow me to yield to the man who stirred up the ethical pot initially - Bishop Robinson:

"The Christian will be the first to confess that Christ does not supply him with an ethical code, any more than he supplies him with a legal system, or a polity, or an economy. For it was not Jesus' purpose to provide any of these - Jesus' purpose was to call men to the Kingdom of God, to subject everything in their lives to the overriding, unconditional claim of God's utterly gracious yet utterly demanding rule of righteous love. And men could not acknowledge this claim without accepting the constraint of the same sacrificial, unselfregarding agape over all their relations with each other. It is this undeviating claim, this inescapable constraint, which provides the profoundly constant element in the distinctively Christian response in every age or clime. For it produces in Christians, however different or diversely placed, a direction, a cast, a style of life, which is recognizably and gloriously the same. Yet what precisely they must do to embody the claim will differ with every century, group and individual." (J.A.T. Robinson, Christian Morals Today, Westminster, 1963, p. 12-13)

I apologize for so long a quote - but it would have taken me much longer to say it - not nearly so well. Several observations are in order. When we are discussing Christian Ethics we are not talking about a Code at all. We are talking about a direction, a style of life that will differ in each age - in each situation. In this system there is no absolute at all -- except the unconditional imperative to love. It is anything but moral anarchy -- it is the extremely difficult, extremely responsible position of doing in every situation that which is loving. It is not new. It is called the "New Morality" but I hope I have been able to demonstrate that it has its roots in the behavior and teachings of Jesus Christ himself. In the sense that it will always contrast with neat, carefully established codes of behavior it will appear to be new. But it is not an invention of the 1960's.

Above all else, it is the most difficult, most demanding position of all. You see, within all of us there appears to be an inherent need to live by rules, rules that will never change. In our religion, we would prefer to be told specifically what is good and what is off limits. We would prefer to relinquish moral responsibility, and be told what to do and what not to do. Organized religion has always exploited this need, and there is no better example than the current birth control controversy. Down through the centuries Christian men have been continually guilty of trying to make the Gospel of Jesus Christ perform in this manner.

The legend of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's great novel, The Brothers Karamozov, expressed that great truth about human nature. It is a story about the terrible burden of freedom (op, cit. pp.81-82)

"Christ returned to earth, and the Spanish Inquisitor, recognizing him in a crowd watching a religious procession, had him arrested at once. In the dead of night, he visited the Christ in secret, embarrassed, trying to explain that most people do not want freedom, they want security. If you really love people, he argued, you make them happy, not free. Freedom is danger, openness. They want law, not responsibility; they want the neurotic comfort of rules, not the spiritual open-places of decision making. They prefer absolutes to relativities. The Christ, he says, must not come back again to start all of that old business about freedom and grace and commitment and responsibility. Let things be, just let the Church handle them. Let him please go away."

Of course, Christ will not go away. All who hear his Gospel, are called to new lives of responsible freedom. We are called to be responsible - that is - responsive in each and every situation that demands a moral decision. Rules do not respond- they are just rules. We are called to do what is good - what is loving -- from what we have learned about the will of God to do what corresponds to that Holy Will.

That is, Jesus Christ has called us to lives of freedom. May we humbly and prayerfully live that freedom responsibly.

The Christian Ethic - Responsible Freedom, Part II
October 13, 1968
Matthew 5:17-20;Romand 13:7--9

By way of introduction, allow me to presume to play both parts in a quick game of "word-association". Morals - sex; ethics - law; Christian ethics - a restrictive code. Now you may not have responded exactly in that manner. But most people would. Morals have something to do with sex; Ethics means the law which defines behavioral limitations: the Christian ethic is a very specific and very rigid behavioral code. This sermon is dedicated to erasing those three responses -- (conditional reflexes would be a better description) and replacing them with three new ideas. 1) that morality means the way you live your life in all respects, including but not exclusively the sexual aspect. 2) that ethics is a total approach to decision making situations. 3) that Christian ethics indicates a positive activity - not a code of restrictions.

As some, but not all, of you will recall, this is the second and concluding part of a project I began two Sundays ago. Because of this arrangement it will be necessary to go back over some of the ground we covered on that occasion. In the ensuing two week period, several of you have spoken to me about the sermon, nearly all about the opening illustration. Mrs. Bergmeier and her perplexing moral dilemma are being discussed and will be remembered far more than anything I subsequently had to say about Christian Ethics, and that is significant. The fact that you are talking about ethics in terms of a specific set of circumstances, and not a clear-cut moral law, indicates that Ethics is a total approach to specific situations: that is to say, Christian Ethics are situational.

On occasion, Jesus Christ, himself, broke the moral law. Paul taught that men were free from the obsessive strictures of Jewish legalism and throughout the New Testament the ethical-moral thrust is on doing what is loving in every situation, and not on an ethical code.

The New Testament teaches that the legalistic approach to morality can be, and often is, a dangerous exercise. In the New Testament slavish obedience to the law is seen as a denial of God given freedom, an abrogation of moral responsibility. Furthermore, much of the New Testament - namely the letters of Paul-- was written for the express purpose of telling men that they were saved by the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and not by obeying the religious laws.

In any case, I believe we can say that the situational approach to ethics is not new; that it comes from the New Testament and that it is relevant and helpful in every age. If, at this point, you don't know what I mean by the situational approach, let me illustrate. H. Richard Niebuhr used the following image to talk about moral responsibility: "...picture the moral agent as a motor car driver traveling along the road and making forty decisions a minute. If he and his passengers are to reach their destination in safety he must know the rules of the road, and he must know where he is trying to go, but he must also be able to handle his car, judge the condition of the highway, guess what the other drivers are going to do, respond quickly to their actions and keep in mind the effect his responses will have on them. You may obey all the rules in the highway code and still have an accident, you may have to break one of the rules to avoid having an accident, you will always have to keep responding to what is going on and what you think others are doing, and you must always remember the effect your actions will have on your neighbors." (H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Responsible Self", New York, Harper and Row, 1963, pp. 108ff)

That very clearly underscores the point I want to make by way of introduction this morning: that is - that the morally responsible person takes the law into account, but that he is ultimately responsible for the welfare of others - in this case his passengers; and that the decisions he makes are going to be determined by the particularities of the immediate situation. That is what the situational approach is all about.

One of the problems, however, is in not distinguishing very clearly between situationalism as an ethical approach and Christian situationalism. This needs to be done unambiguously and immediately. There is currently in this nation a very real concern for law and order. It is without a doubt the most volatile issue before the American body politic. And behind the very real concern for law and order, I believe, is a feeling that the old, accepted moral standards are being eroded by a kind of anarchy--or "anything goes" mentality. We are threatened and disturbed by what we think we see happening to the so-called moral fibre of the nation; that is, the complete discarding of all laws, all moral guidelines, all accepted standards of what is right and wrong.

Personally, I don't believe things are quite so bad as they seem, and I would suggest that we are the victims of some very irresponsible exploitation in the campaign propoganda issuing forth around this issue. The point is that if the generally accepted moral standards of this nation are being discarded, this is not at all the same thing as Christian situationalism. The Christian ethic is not anarchistic. It does not operate in a vacuum, and any attempt to saddle it with the Berkely Free Speech Movement or "free love" is patent nonsense.

Any civilization that is going to survive for long must have a law that is respected and obeyed by all the people. The law is a kind of moral net around the culture. In our situation Chritians are called to help create the law, criticize it when they feel it is inadequate, try to change it, and to give it respect and support. But for the Christian the law - any law - is never infallible. That is important. That is why the Gospel of Jesus Christ has historically provided the most radical threat to all forms of totalitarianism. For the Christian, the law is a teacher - but love is the master. For the Christian rules and codes and moral standards are necessary and helpful. But the only unchanging moral demand is the imperative to love. To the situational ethical approach the Christian brings his ultimate commitment to do what is loving and that makes all the difference in the world.

To move from the general to the specific, it is apparent that if you're going to talk about morality, sooner or later you've got to get around to dealing with sex. "A morals charge" - is synonymous in our idiom with a sex offense. "Loose morals" is an idiom which means loose sexual morals. That is how we think, and while it is an obvious indicator of our neurotic sexuality it is the area of greatest concern. After all, there are other areas in life in which men act either morally or immorally. But we are literally "hung up" on sex - so let's attempt to deal with it.

What, for instance, does the Christian situational approach say about pre-marital sex? That's what really bothers us, isn't it? For the sake of being clear, let's first look at what two other ethical positions say about the question.

The traditional legalistic approach says flatly, "Don't; premarital sex is wrong under any and all conditions; it is inherently sinful, immoral, and that's that!" This position is as significant for what it doesn't say and for what it implies, as it is for its forthright simplicity. First, it doesn't deal at all with sex as a moral, good human activity. All it says is that sex is bad outside of marriage -- which means that sex is good inside marriage - and that is simply not true. Marriage alone does not make sex good: in fact, sex probably destroys more marriages than any other single problem. The law - the moral standard here - is not so much wrong, as it is incomplete. Secondly, it implies that there is somthing just a little bit wrong with human sexuality, per se. And that feeling, which so pervades our moral climate, is un-healthy, unscriptural and destructive.

The pure situationist position, on the other hand, is that if you feel like doing it, and if there is nothing in the particular situation that makes it unadvisable, go right ahead. Needless to say, the Christian doesn't buy that either.

The Christian position here, as elsewhere, is - "Do what is loving: do what is responsible for everyone concerned." And it is my strongest conviction that on this basis, you can build the very best case that premarital sex is not a loving thing at all, it is not responsible because someone is going to get hurt - if not physically then emotionally; there are many other people involved, and finally - until two people are married - they are not responsible for each other regardless of the intensity

of their feelings, and that only within the loving responsibility of legal marriage are they free to enjoy the good but risky gift of sex.

Sex is neither the Alpha nor the Omega of man's moral behavior, but this is how the Christian would approach that particular question. You see, the Christian situational approach encourages us to be free and responsible in a way a law cannot provide. Donald Mathers puts it this way, "It (situational ethics) is continuously urging the need to be responsive to the needs of others and the actions of others, and the need to take into account the response that these others will make to our actions... It does not give you simple answers to the question "What ought I to do?" If things turn out badly it denies you the comfort of believing that at least what you did was the right thing. But it does emphasize in an important and healthy way the fact that we are all our brothers' keepers and all responsible for each." (The Reformed and Presbyterian World, March, 1968, p.12)

Joseph Fletcher puts it even more graphically. The legalist says in effect: "Do what is right and let the chips fall where they may." The situational decision maker says right back at his metaphysical rival: "Ha! Whether what you are doing is right or not depends precisely upon where the chips fall." (op.cit. p.144)

So much for the new Morality. I don't presume that your questions are answered. In fact, I would hope that questions have been raised and left for you to wrestle with. But the title of this effort is The Christian Ethic, and frankly we have hardly begun to plumb the depths. We have not even mentioned the most important observation of all - that the Christian Ethic is basically and fundamentally something people do - and not a set of behavioral restrictions.

You heard, this morning, from Matthew's Gospel. Jesus was discussing the relationship of the law to individual behavior in the presence of the Pharisees - men who zealously obeyed every bit of the law. This is what he said, "...unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." That is the radical nature of the Christian Ethic. For, you see, it is quite impossible to be more righteous than a perfect keeper of the law - unless righteousness, goodness, morality, if you will - is something that goes beyond the law.

Jesus was his own interpreter. He told the parable of the Good Samaritan and in that memorable story, you will remember, the righteous man does his work outside the framework of the law, going farther than the rules demanded, giving of himself for the welfare of the wounded traveller.

Let's begin to think of Christian Ethics in these terms: that is, in terms not of what we are refraining from doing, but what it is we are doing in the world for the sake of Jesus Christ. Having spent two weeks talking about Situation Ethics, I would be happy to forget the whole thing and focus on the uniqueness of the Christian faith - the joyful life of love lived for the sake of others.

The life of the Christian is a happy sharing of a great love, a life that is moral to the degree that it is loving and helping and healing and serving.

The world needs that kind of witness. Our community, our state and our nation need men and women with the commitment and courage to be moral in this aggressive , uniquely Christ-like manner.

May God grant us that courage.

Amen.